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“I no longer let anyone hit me for free”: Affective identificatory practices of women imprisoned for violent crimes

Satu Venäläinen

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which Finnish women serving prison sentences for violent crimes attach meaning to their violence and to themselves in relation to it. The analysis is based on a study involving 20 imprisoned women, who either sent a written account or were interviewed. The analysis draws upon critical discursive psychology and Sara Ahmed’s theorization of emotions. Hence, it focuses on the affective and discursive processes through which the women participating in the study enact identities in their narratives about their involvement with violence. These enactments are conceptualized as *affective identificatory practices* in which gendered, socio-culturally circulating meanings and valuations become entwined with personal histories in locally variant ways. Four different groups of selves that emerged from the participants’ narratives are discussed: victimized selves, defender selves, lost selves and rehabilitated/unrehabilitatable selves. By looking at the constitution of these selves in close detail, I put forward a reading in which the participants are seen as primarily striving to enact autonomous identities and hence to subvert devaluation by distancing themselves from vulnerability, which threatens their integrity as subjects.

Keywords

Affectivity, agency, criminalized women, identity, violence, vulnerability

In analyses of women’s use of violence and their involvement in crime, it has been noted that the boundaries between women’s victimization and their agentic perpetration of violence or other crimes often become blurred (Ferraro, 2006). The quote¹ in the title – “I no longer let anyone hit me for free” – which is derived from narratives by women imprisoned for violent crimes, can be seen as exemplifying this kind of blurring. If it is understood as a part of identity enactment, however, it can also be viewed as an effort performatively to constitute an identity by establishing a boundary between victimhood in the past and one’s agentic self in the present. This is the kind of reading of narratives by imprisoned women that I enact in this article. I focus in particular on the ways in which the imprisoned women ascribe meaning to their violence and to themselves. By attending in

detail to discursive and affective processes in these women's identity enactments, the article aims to illustrate how these enactments relate to the gendered meanings and valuations attached to victimhood and the use of violence in multifaceted and ambivalent ways.

In several studies, women's own victimization has been reported as intimately linked to their use of violence, particularly in cases of severe or lethal violence towards their intimate partners (e.g. Banwell, 2010; Moen, Nygren, & Edin, 2016; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2012; Wesely, 2006). Importantly, these studies have offered insight into how gendered power relations are inscribed into women's use of violence. They have thus created openings for challenging those claims to gender symmetry – with their implications of the redundancy of feminist analyses of violence – that have periodically been made in academic discussions about (intimate partner) violence (see Enander, 2011, for further discussion).

It has also been observed by feminist criminologists that, in order to acquire nuanced understandings about women's involvement with violence, it is crucial to study the ways in which the women who have perpetrated, and are possibly imprisoned for, violent crimes attach meaning to their violence (e.g. Banwell, 2010; Comack & Brickey, 2007; Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez, 2006). Elizabeth Comack and Salena Brickey (2007), for instance, have analysed the narratives of criminalized women in order to see how they might draw upon or resist the common discourses constructing them as mad, bad, or victims (see Gilbert, 2002). On the basis of their analysis, they concluded that all of those categorizations were present in the talk of the women they interviewed, and that the possibilities for the women in their study to be positioned in relation to violence were therefore multifaceted. Similarly, in the interview talk of imprisoned women in a study by Candace Kruttschnitt and Kristin Carbone-Lopez (2006), violence was linked to various different contexts and motivations. Also, in a recent study conducted in Finland (Lattu, 2016), plurality was observed in the meanings of violence, along with descriptions of both victimization and agentic use of violence, in the talk of women who have committed violence. Hence, these studies indicate that various ways of making sense of their violence may be available to women. These different modes of sense-making allow for different portrayals of selves that are informed by culturally circulating gendered meanings as well as elements of local contexts, such as imprisonment (Gueta & Chen, 2016).

Theoretical and methodological framings

In this article, the meanings linked to women's use of violence are viewed, in particular, in terms of the identities they allow women convicted of violent crimes to enact. The analytical focus is on what I call *affective identificatory practices*, in which I see the study participants engaging when

narrating their use of violence. This conceptualization brings together views on identity construction developed in critical discursive psychology (CDP) and Sara Ahmed's (2014) theorization on affects as constitutive of subjects and the boundaries that separate them from others. Drawing particularly on Margaret Wetherell's (e.g. 2008) work on identities in CDP, as well as her more recent discussion on affect and emotions (Wetherell, 2012), I approach enactments of gendered identities as based on fluid interactions with other people and with discursive resources for meaning-making. From this perspective, subjects are seen as both constituted in discourse and actively constituting themselves as gendered beings by taking part in constant practices of positioning in relation to available subject positions (Edley & Wetherell, 2008; cf. Bacchi, 2005). Following Wetherell (2008; 2012), I see the concept of practice as a good way to capture the dynamic nature of these positionings as dependent on each particular, local context of talk (or other action), while also demonstrating continuity as part of their entanglement with both socio-culturally circulating discourses and subjects' personal histories.² Thus, the practices through which identities are enacted are seen as means of establishing a sense of personal continuity and coherence. However, this is not an endeavour that subjects can undertake freely or in isolation from the social, but rather it is dependent on one's possibilities for becoming recognizable within social intelligibility (cf. Lawler, 2014).

Furthermore, focusing on the discursive *and* affective aspects of identificatory practices allows us to envision the ways in which they *matter* in people's lives. Similar to Christina Scharff (2011), I see that Sara Ahmed's (2014) theorization fruitfully complements a discursive-psychological view of identity enactments. Ahmed (2014) argues that affects are central to the ways in which subjects (and their identities) are constituted. According to Ahmed (2014, p. 4), "emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others." In other words, Ahmed argues that the repetition of certain kinds of practice constitutes habitualized ways of orienting affectively towards others. These orientations produce subjects by giving form to their bodies and the surfaces that delineate them, through which they become constituted as entities that are separable from other bodies or objects (Ahmed, 2014, p. 10). Thus, in Ahmed's thinking, being constituted as a certain kind of subject is an embodied process. Ahmed (2014, e.g. pp. 10, 28) describes these processes of subject formation particularly in terms of the creation of boundaries that separate and/or unite subjects with other people. These boundaries, and the processes whereby they are enacted, can be seen as both symbolic and material. This means that their analysis also allows us to overcome dichotomizations of body and mind, which I see as a particularly productive angle for the analysis of narratives about violence. Thus, in this paper I draw upon Ahmed's theorization both as a means

of theorizing the continuity of identificatory practices and as a means of attending analytically to the ways in which the body and emotions are evoked in the narratives.

Materials and the analytical procedure

I collected the research material in several different Finnish prisons during the years 2012–2014. The material comprises both interviews and written accounts by women imprisoned for violent crimes. Before collecting this material, I obtained a research permit from the Criminal Sanctions Agency.³ In each prison, I had a contact person who helped me to recruit participants. I visited these prisons multiple times, explaining about the aims of my research and how women convicted of violent crimes could participate in it. Written accounts were collected by distributing information about the study to potential participants, which included instructions for writing and a return envelope. In some of the prisons, I delivered the materials personally to individuals (accompanied by the contact person), while in others I was given the opportunity to talk about my study and to distribute materials collectively to groups of women. In other cases, the contact persons delivered the instructions for writing along with written invitations to participate in an interview without my having met the participants prior to their participation. Interviews were held in meeting rooms arranged by the contact persons. Only myself as an interviewer and the participants were present in the room. The interview themes, along with the instructions for written accounts, were grounded in the overarching themes of doing and experiencing violence and the feelings and consequences associated with it. The interviews lasted between one and two hours, while the length of the written accounts ranges from half a page to four pages.

Before conducting the interviews, I held a group meeting in one of the prisons with six potential participants (five of whom later volunteered to be interviewed) in order to assess how they would perceive my questions and my research project as a whole. Overall, the participants in the group meeting related to the questions positively and showed interest in the study. In addition, the group meeting offered preliminary insights into the recurring modes of meaning-making shared among many of the participants.⁴

The research material that I collected comprises 14 written accounts and 11 interviews with women serving a prison sentence for violent crimes. Altogether there were 20 participants, as five of the women interviewed also sent in a written account. Five of the interviews were tape-recorded, while six of them were not due to restrictions imposed by the prison employees who arranged the interviews. During the unrecorded interviews, I wrote down the participants' speech verbatim to the extent that it was possible, and completed my notes immediately after the interviews. While they do provide important insights into the overall tendencies in meaning-making

and the expressions that were used and recurred in the other materials, for the most part these interviews provide background for more detailed analyses of the recorded interviews and written accounts.

Recorded interviews and written accounts are obviously different types of material. In interviews, meaning-making occurs in interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). This is not the case, at least not to the same extent, in accounts that are written by participants alone. However, what is present in both written accounts and interviews is an interaction with socio-culturally available resources for meaning-making (e.g. May, 2008). This study focuses in particular on this kind of interaction between enactments of selves in the participants' talk/text and the socio-culturally available resources that the women draw upon in constituting them. Therefore, both written accounts and interviews can be seen as fruitful materials for the current analysis, and hence are not analysed separately from each other. All the materials were originally in Finnish, and the analysis was also conducted in Finnish by the author. The extracts in the analysis below have been translated by the author. The aim while translating was to stay as close to the original modes of delivery as possible, while also ensuring the intelligibility of talk/text.

The participants ranged in age from 23 to 54 years⁵, and were all of Finnish descent. For the most part, they talked about types of fractured pasts that resonate with those previously noted as common among imprisoned women in Finland and elsewhere (Jokinen, 2011). Their narratives about their lives prior to imprisonment often included descriptions of substance abuse, experiences of violent abuse directed towards them, often by intimate companions, and limited engagement with working life and/or education. A few of them also described extended involvement in criminal circles and/or living on the streets. The crimes that led to their prison sentences ranged from aggravated assault to homicide. For some, the current sentence was their first, while others had also served previous sentences for violent or other types of crime. Most of the participants had been convicted of violent crimes directed at their male spouses. However, some had been convicted of violent crimes directed at other, female or male, victims. Most had been in an intimate partner relationship prior to their current sentence, and many also had an ongoing intimate partner relationship. Most of the participants also had children. However, they were usually able to have only limited contact with their children during their imprisonment.

In line with the analytical framework described in the previous section, the analysis focused on the enactments of selves in relation to violence in the participants' narratives. In practice, the analysis was conducted by focusing on the following dimensions in the material: agency, affects, and overall narratives. The analysis involved, firstly, distinguishing different ways

in which violence is made meaningful in the participants' narratives. Here, the concept of agency was used as a central analytical tool. Agency is understood in this context as referring to the level and modes of subjects' ability to act in their environments (McNay, 2008). In the analysis, agency is approached through the participants' discursive descriptions of their actions, which function in formulating specific relationships between them and their activities. My specific interest is in the ways in which these descriptions allow the participants to attach different meanings to themselves, and thus to enact certain kinds of identities (see Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007; Venäläinen, 2016).

A focus on discursive expressions of affects comprises another layer of analysis. Here, I read the materials with the help of Ahmed's (2014) theorization. In addition to expressions of emotion, I also looked at the ways in which talk/texts about bodies and their boundaries figured in the participants' narratives. Thirdly, the analysis focused on the ways in which the participants' various self-presentations, or nested substories (see Presser, 2010), were discursively bound together and sequenced in their talk/texts so as to construct overall narratives about themselves and their involvement with violence. In this part of the analysis, I looked at discursive expressions of life stages, time and change, which were accomplished, for example, by contrasting one's self and modes of acting in the past with those of the present or future (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004).

As the result of the analysis, I distinguished different groups of selves enacted in the participants' narratives. The sections that follow are based on each of these groups. Most participants' talk/texts included several different selves; however, not all of these were necessarily present in all of the participants' narratives. In the following sections, these groups of selves are each presented under their own titles, roughly in the order in which they predominantly appear in the participants' overall narratives. However, in practice these different selves often alternate and entwine with each other in the participants' talk/texts.

Victimized selves

My second husband and later the third one as well used the kind of violence where there wasn't any part of my body that hadn't been hurt in some way, sometimes permanently. Also the infamous third party – king Alcohol – played a very big part in my life. My two husbands that I just mentioned made me start using violence against them as well. The situations were such that I really couldn't come up with other ways to get out of them. I grabbed a knife and also stabbed with it, even seriously, but not lethally. Fear was always present and I even wished for my husbands' deaths, not by

my actions, but to get away from their power. I was so weak, that I didn't know how to, couldn't, didn't realize how to leave soon enough. (Kirsi, written account)⁶

Many of the participants talked, sometimes at length, about their victimhood, positioning it in their narratives as a motivating context for their own use of violence. They often described it as extending across different time periods and various relationships in their lives, although usually their descriptions focused on victimization in intimate partner relationships.⁷ Above, Kirsi describes how violence directed against her injured her body and led to her own use of violence, which she also links to alcohol use. Like some of the other participants, she attaches fear, weakness and internal incompetence to her past victimized self when giving an account of why she did not leave the abusive relationship and, by implication, for the beginning of her own use of violence. The act of accounting for not leaving implies a presumption that leaving was her responsibility. This presumption resonates with the culturally prevalent positioning of women who are victims of intimate partner violence as being responsible for ending the abuse directed against them by taking action, such as leaving abusive relationships (Enander, 2010). In Kirsi's narrative, her violence is described as a result of not having lived up to these expectations. Thus, despite the fact that she associates her use of violence with being abused by others, her account can be read as accepting at least partial blame for being too "weak" to leave and to avoid doing violence herself. This indirectly constitutes her past position of a weak victim, and the lack of agency inscribed into it, as shameful and regrettable.

A somewhat similar yet more explicit attachment of shame to victimhood is evident in Petra's interview talk below about her own victimization. In the extract, Petra describes how she hates violence because she has encountered it so much in the past as a victim of abuse by her intimate partner.

P: And so [...] I [...] sort of hate that violence, [because] I've experienced it so much myself [...]. At first I was horribly ashamed of it and... [**I:** Mm] embarrassed and then I was sort of totally fucked up [thinking] about why that guy always beats me

I: Yeah

P: But then it just sort of got to that, so that yeah I started hitting back.

(Petra, recorded interview)

Similar to Kirsi, Petra links the beginning of her own use of violence to her victimhood, portraying it as a result of having been abused herself. In doing this, she describes a transformation from a

victim who was ashamed and helpless into someone with agency who was not only a target of violence, but who responded to it by hitting back. Like Petra, several other participants depicted this kind of transformation. As mentioned in the introduction, they said that, after a period of being abused, they reached a point after which they would no longer “take a beating” or “let anyone hit them for free”. The uses of these expressions can be seen as efforts to attach value to one’s self by proving one’s readiness to make those attempting abuse pay for it. Along with another recurring metaphor in participants’ narratives about their victimization – “reaching one’s limit” – these recurrent expressions also constitute a transition away from victimhood, which, in turn, comes to be associated with a distanced past. Thus, despite victimization, the expressions allow the speakers/writers to portray themselves as agentic, rational and worthy actors who are capable of choosing whether or not to *let* someone beat them, and whether or not to be compensated for being beaten.

I suggest reading these narratives about victimhood and the transition away from it as identity enactments that are based on establishing boundaries between oneself and others, and also between one’s past position as a victim and the more recent position as someone with agency. Taking inspiration from Ahmed (2014), the descriptions of victimization in the participants’ narratives can be read as denoting violations of their embodied boundaries in both a material and a symbolic sense. That is, victimization exposes one’s vulnerability and thus the porosity of the embodied boundaries that separate us from others (Ronkainen, 2002). In the light of idealized Western notions of invulnerable, bounded bodies as signs of proper subjects (Shildrick, 2002, p. 5), victimization reduces women – whose possession of such a body is questionable to begin with – to “incomplete subjects” (Ronkainen, 2002). In this reading, then, the participants’ narratives about violence as a result of victimization can be seen as indicating efforts to (re)gain a valuable subjecthood that has been put under threat.

Defender selves

In addition to descriptions of victimhood as constituting prolonged stages in their lives, several participants’ narratives also include more detailed depictions of situations where they faced the threat of being victimized and responded to that threat by using violence. Through these depictions, they often enacted selves that were based on efforts actively to defend themselves against impending threats. These selves are therefore usually attached to more agentic descriptions of uses of violence than, for instance, victimized selves. However, descriptions of affects that denote vulnerability are usually also integral to the enactment of these selves. For instance, Tuula describes

how she feels a need to act in self-defence in situations that provoke the fear of being “trampled” by someone:

T: [...] with me it’s also that if I’m afraid of some stronger [**I:** Mm] character, being shy around them [**I:** Mm, mm]... then I have to all the time sort of fend off, and be quite... [**I:** Yeah] harsh, because I’m scared that otherwise I’ll get trampled. (Tuula, recorded interview)

A similar type of reacting defensively was also described by Salla, who said that she tends automatically to react violently if someone touches her skin:

S: [...] I sort of see red because I can’t stand being touched [**I:** Yeah, yeah], I have after all... mm all my, every single intimate [partner] relationship has so far been violent. (Salla, recorded interview)

Salla attributes her “seeing red” when touched to her past victimization in intimate relationships. She therefore describes herself as associating others’ acts of touching her skin with threats of violence, because of her past experiences of being abused. In her account, fear is replaced with anger, which further reinforces the claim she is implicitly making that she has the right to remain untouched. Anger thus also further reinforces her appearance as agentic. The significance of skin in Salla’s description offers an illustrative angle upon enactments of defender selves. As Ahmed (2014, p. 25) writes, skin “both separates us from others [and] also connects us to others”; it can hence be seen as material for both individuality and self-containment and for vulnerability towards others’ impact on one’s self. This includes vulnerability in those instances when contact is associated with threat, as it is in these narratives. Thus, a violent response to her skin being touched in Salla’s description can be seen as an effort to constitute a self that is shielded from the invasions of others. This process of shielding necessitates constant vigilance in guarding the boundaries of the self being constituted. In Salla’s narrative, as well as in several others, these kinds of constant defensive reactions are described as automatic. In sum, then, the selves constituted in these descriptions are always on guard. They are based on habituated preparedness to defend oneself against others who are seen as threatening.

In a few of the participants’ narratives, such agentic defence extends not only to the participants themselves but also to protecting particular others – usually those to whom they are close, or sometimes those considered as being in need of protection. In these narratives, a boundary

is drawn between other perpetrators' unjustified violence and what is characterized as justifiable violence that one is prepared to use as a counterforce against the first kind. Simultaneously, a related distinction emerges between those others whom one wishes to protect and those who might threaten them. This kind of self, which is based on defending others, is displayed in Ulla's account below, where she discusses her relation to violence in general.

I can honestly state that the only thing that might lead me to use violence is because I could never accept that something would happen to my family, relatives or others close to me [...] that is a sufficient reason for me to act violently. For me, family is a sacred thing that I protect. (Ulla, written account)

Ulla envisions herself as an agentic protector of those close to her, towards whom she feels a deep affectual devotion. Since love for those close to us is a culturally powerful resource for justifying violence against threatening others (cf. Ahmed, 2014, pp. 123–124), violence motivated by love can seem less threatening to one's moral compass than violence that is signified in other ways. Thus, the love in Ulla's account works to mitigate the problematic morals surrounding violence. It can therefore also be seen as facilitating her adoption of the position of an active defender of others with her use of violence.

While defender selves are enacted through agentic descriptions of using violence, there are simultaneously in these descriptions constant references to vulnerability and thus to the threat of not appearing as a self-determining subject. This kind of co-presence of vulnerability and agency was particularly vividly described by Henna in an unrecorded interview. She told me that doing violence gives her a sense of being strong and confident and therefore allows her to defend herself against disrespect, which she told she had encountered in abundance throughout her life. In Henna's narrative – as well as many others' – violence appears as a means of accruing value to one's self that has otherwise been in short supply. This resonates with discourses that are common in street cultures or in other social milieus marked by uncertainty and disadvantage (e.g. Henriksen & Miller, 2012). Thus, despite an agentic orientation towards actively defeating vulnerability, and in partial concurrence with the 'victimized selves' analysed above, these defender selves are not built on positions of security. Rather, they teeter on an insecure foundation of constant threat that one's boundaries will be invaded or demolished.

Lost selves

As either an alternative to or alternating (and occasionally entwining) with victimized or defender selves, several participants' descriptions of violent incidents include constructions of what I call lost selves. These were accomplished, for example, by using metaphorical expressions denoting a loss of control when accounting for violence, such as "losing my temper", "flipping out", or "blacking out". These expressions position the doer of violence as being in an altered state of mind, as temporarily losing the self that would normally be able to exert control over her actions. Similar to defender selves, descriptions of lost selves are frequently preceded by accounts of prolonged victimhood or maltreatment, or linked to situations of being attacked. In the extract below, Miia describes this kind of loss of control in a situation in which her spouse physically attacks and threatens to kill her. In her narrative, the attack leads to her stabbing him with a knife.

M: [...] it went totally dark for me, it felt sort of like some thread got snapped or broken off there inside, sort of like some... some sort of black tornado [a slight laugh] had sucked me in [...] (Miia, recorded interview)

Miia's description evokes an image of her being taken over by an overwhelming force beyond her control. This threatening force appears to be simultaneously external and internal: a tornado that sweeps her along, and a thread inside her that snaps. Thus, compared to selves built on defending against other, threatening people, descriptions such as Miia's refer to threats that are more obscure and not as easily located, identified or kept separate from one's self. Rather, the threats seemingly encroach upon a space inside the narrator, thus violating the embodied boundary between outside and inside.

Occasionally, these kinds of descriptions evoke an image of inability to control one's actions on a more continuous basis. For example, in other parts of her interview, Miia talks about impulsiveness as a personality trait that places her at risk of doing violence in certain kinds of situations. This description implies difficulties with self-trust, an aspect that is also evident in Riina's talk, below. This extract is part of a discussion about her future life, after imprisonment.

R: I am myself maybe still at times sort of scared, because, like, after all I have always thought that I'm not, like, violent myself [...] so maybe still, like... at times comes such a fear that what if I... it just snaps again? (Riina, recorded interview)

In Riina's account, the source of her fear is the threat of "losing it" in the future – a fear based on this having happened to her before, which led to her prison sentence. According to Ahmed (2014, p.

65), fear “involves an *anticipation* of hurt or injury” (emphasis in original). In this sense, fearing a loss of control marks it as a hurtful experience. Ahmed (2014, p. 67) also writes that fear enacts a withdrawal from that which one does not want to become. Thus, in Riina’s narrative, her fear of losing control and doing violence as a result can be seen as linked to a desire to establish a boundary between herself and the position of a perpetrator of violence. However, this boundary is simultaneously undermined in her narrative: the potential recurrence of violence is associated with the possibility of discovering that, despite what she has believed, she might after all be prone to snapping and thus *be* “violent” by nature.

Both Riina and Miia discuss the threat of doing violence again in the future not only in terms of their internal propensities, but also in relation to their use of alcohol. Similar to several other participants, they closely associated excessive use of alcohol (and/or other substances in some cases) with their use of violence. In some narratives, these kinds of descriptions of substance abuse in combination with the use of violence create images of the participants having had extended periods in their lives of feeling lost. Often, they look back on those periods as a kind of nightmare, to which they do not want to return.

Lost selves emerge primarily through non-agentic descriptions of violence, which are often associated with losing self-control. In most of the narratives that describe lost selves, there are attempts to build distance from the violence signified through loss of control. This distancing is often enacted through fear. It is also enacted by participants explicitly emphasizing their desire to avoid future situations marked by threats of violence, such as those involving substance abuse. Focusing on the loss of control as something that is feared and shied away from in these narratives, I suggest that the gravity of the threat that it stands for is linked to the mechanisms of othering through which prevalent, gendered notions regarding sanity have historically been constructed in psychological sciences. These notions are centrally based on self-control and rationality as the marks of sane (i.e. psychologically stable) subjects, and these are attributes that women and other groups of people with a lesser status have been deemed to lack (Blackman, 2008). Therefore, for women in particular, associating their acts of violence with a loss of control can entail grave difficulties because of the acuteness of the danger that they will be seen as irrational, pathological “others” (cf. Lazar, 2008).

Rehabilitated and unrehabilitatable selves

L: And, like, then this prison maybe helped with it, that... sometimes earlier, for example, when... someone bothered me for long enough and... [I: Yeah] like that, I remember I got thoughts that like, hell, I would like to beat that [person] to the point

of putting them in hospital [I: Yeah, yeah], but this prison maybe, like, helped my mind sort of... so that... I don't get those kinds [of thought] anymore, I just think that... how could we discuss this thing? (Liina, recorded interview)

In their talk/texts, many of the participants emphasized their present or envisioned future lives as being free from violence – whether perpetrated by themselves or others. These can be seen as further efforts to distance themselves from the troubled positions associated with violence, and to enact non-violent, rehabilitated selves. These efforts rely heavily on the use of expressions indicating change and difference between the past, violent self and the present self. As in Liina's talk above, the present self in these narratives is often characterized not only as having an inclination to avoid violence but also as having newly developed competencies to support that inclination. These rehabilitated selves are positioned as the desired end point in many participants' overall narratives. However, some of the narratives end on a more desolate note; life has been a series of events filled with misery, and there is no clear promise of change. These narratives do not end in redemption or rehabilitation, but rather construct selves that are stuck in fear or uncertainty about the future. These selves lack a sense of agency in being capable of attaining a non-violent self that has a chance of being accepted by society. A central source of the lack of faith in a brighter future in these narratives are the unaccepting reactions of others and the shame that accompanies them, as in Kirsi's account:

I also got a reputation as a “knife-fighter” because of my acts back then, and I'm not at all proud of myself. I've also been found extremely dangerous to another's life, health and freedom, and despite its falseness it's a kind of stamp that will follow me one way or the other for the rest of my life. (Kirsi, written account)

The centrality of shame is implied in Kirsi's account through her rejection of pride. Despite denying the legitimacy of being labelled as dangerous, and thus working towards a moral, non-violent self without the need to feel shame, Kirsi presents this label as sticking to her and thus as permanently shadowing her future. As Ahmed (2014, pp. 59–60) has noted, certain emotions and meanings stick to some figures more easily than they do to others. This is due to culturally and historically recurring evaluations. The tacking of shame onto women indicted for violence is reinforced by their gendered portrayals in public discourse as being deviant others, as more abnormal than men who commit violence. Women's violence is portrayed and reproduced as more abnormal than men's because the notion of women doing violence disturbs naturalized, hierarchical differences between

women and men (e.g. Gilbert, 2002; Morrissey, 2003). Particularly in the light of these recurrent gendered processes of othering, carrying the stigma of being a dangerous, violent woman means being cast into a position that may restrict her living space; she is forced to fear that she is feared by others (cf. Ahmed, 2014, p. 69). However, unlike Kirsi, some of the other participants do describe overcoming such shame and the associated impact of being labelled as deviant. Sanni, for instance, talked about having found new confidence during her imprisonment. She particularly associated this change with her opportunities to study and to acquire a profession while in prison. In the extract below, she talks about how everyday activities involving social encounters used to cause her anxiety, and how she feels that she has now overcome those feelings and is able to “do something” with her life.

S: I didn't believe earlier that I could, like... [I: Yeah] be okay... always had that sort of, like, oh man, sorry that I exist and... something like that

I: Yeah, yeah

S: So that now [...] [I] have the courage to, like, go to like... [I: Yeah] those kinds of things, well for some people they're just... kind of, like, self-evident things, but for me they haven't been...

I: Mm

S: So that, like... [I: Mm] like really, really great that like... at last, like, I've got the courage and [...], so that I now have something that I can, like, do in life.

(Sanni, recorded interview)

While Sanni describes her past self as immobilized due to shame and lack of confidence, what is constituted as her present, more confident self allows her finally to find purpose in life by doing ordinary things. Echoing therapeutic discourses common in rehabilitation programmes targeted at criminalized women, which emphasize the role of women's low self-esteem in their risk of violent reoffending (Pollack, 2007), the self that is constituted in her description holds promise for attaining membership in society and thus, by implication, for leaving behind a criminal life imbued with violence. Similar to the prison narratives analysed by Lena Karlsson (2013), this self that has been successful in surviving and overcoming hardships – such as debilitating shame – appears as agentic, due to a capacity to move away from a past in which there was a risk of doing violence, towards a future self that has a chance of living a “normal life”. This type of “normal life” is something that several participants said they dreamed of, but had had little chance of experiencing. In these descriptions, then, value is attached to one's self through having the possibility of becoming

reintegrated into society by actively participating in socially acceptable, non-violent activities such as work. However, as Kirsi's account illustrates, the actualization of the promise of this kind of brighter future is far from easily attainable for all of those to whose bodies the stigma of a "violent woman" is in danger of sticking.

Conclusion

The analysis of imprisoned women's narratives about violence presented above reveals multiplicity and complexity in the meanings that these women attach to violence, and to themselves in relation to it. Similar to some earlier studies by feminist criminologists (e.g. Comack & Brickey, 2007), in these narratives violence was attached to vulnerability and victimization as well as agentic efforts to defend oneself or others. In this article, I have approached the participants' talk/texts about violence as a part of affective identificatory practices, through which various context-bound and yet partially continuous selves are constituted. This approach allows for a nuanced, multilevel analysis of the participants' identity enactments. Moreover, it emphasizes a move towards viewing these identity enactments as continuously fluctuating but also simultaneously constrained by both personal histories and socio-culturally circulating, gendered meanings and valuations.

It is noteworthy that, even though vulnerability is present in the participants' narratives in various forms, it is frequently distanced from the positions towards which they are striving. This distancing is enacted by associating positions of vulnerability – based for instance on being physically attacked, losing a sense of control or facing unaccepting reactions from others – with threats that require active resistance. In terms of subject formation, this distancing can be seen as linked to aspirations to be seen, and to see oneself, as a coherent, self-possessed entity. Simultaneously however, it also highlights the precariousness of those aspirations (Shildrick, 2002, p. 5.). This recurring repudiation of vulnerability thus allows the individual to strive towards the type of worthy subjecthood that is predominant in Western liberal-humanist ideologies and places specific value on autonomy (Lawler, 2014, p. 180). The context of imprisonment is likely to be inscribed in these aspirations in the participants' narratives; serving a prison sentence for violent crimes may particularly heighten the need to position oneself in ways that allow one to appear as a socially valuable subject. Moreover, enacting selves that appear agentic may also be linked with attempts to counter the relative powerlessness brought on by imprisonment (Presser, 2010). Such enactments may also work to repudiate culturally circulating notions about women who have committed violence based on stereotypical categorizations marking them as deviant "others" (Gilbert, 2002; Lazar, 2008; Morrissey, 2003). Enactments of rehabilitated selves may be linked with similar aspirations. While they rely on discourses circulating in prison that the imprisoned

women are expected to reproduce in order to prove their transformation, these positionings may also give imprisoned women hope (Clough & Fine, 2007) and allow attachments to new social orientations.

Furthermore, the fact that the participants are cast into feminine-marked bodies complicates their enactment of identities that are based on repudiating vulnerability. As Ahmed (2014, pp. 2, 69–70), among others, has noted, in predominant Western cultural imaginaries the lesser value of vulnerable bodies – i.e. penetrable bodies with porous surfaces – is linked to their being associated with femininity. Thus, generally speaking, women do not have the same access as men to invulnerable positions, nor are they expected to crave them in similar ways. Neither does the position of a perpetrator of violence by any means secure access for these women to the position of a worthy subject. This can be seen in the affective stickiness (Ahmed, 2014) of the stigmatizing label “violent woman”, which gains its power to shame through its contradictory relation to prevalent notions of femininity. These dynamics of othering and resistance can be seen as playing out in the multiplicity of meanings attached to violence in the analysed narratives; while portrayals of violence based on victimhood or the protection of loved ones may allow the preservation of one’s appearance as feminine, agentic descriptions of doing violence and thus protecting one’s boundaries may also function as a means of negotiating otherness (cf. Gueta & Chen, 2016), by establishing one’s separateness as an individual.⁸

In sum, I suggest viewing these women’s affective identificatory practices as being focused on efforts to subvert devaluations of their selves in both past and present social encounters. Similar to how Ann-Karina Henriksen and Jody Miller (2012) have characterized the violent activities of multiply marginalized girls, the participants in this study can hence be seen as striving, through their narratives about violence, towards mattering within social contexts that mark them as lacking in worth. The otherness they defend against is (at least) doubled; their positioning as perpetrators of violence intersects in complex ways with negatively marked yet required femininity, and its associations with vulnerability.

Notes

¹ This quote is analysed in more detail in the analysis section.

² In her 1997 essay “*It’s a sun-tan, isn’t it?*”: *Auto-biography as an identificatory practice*”, Sara Ahmed also talks about “identificatory practices” in a related way, i.e. as referring to the instability and multiplicity of identifications.

³ Separate research permits were acquired for collecting written accounts (26 August 2011, 36/332/2011) and for conducting interviews (22 November 2013, 54/332/2013).

⁴ The group meeting, along with other methodological issues and reflections, are discussed in more detail in another article (Venäläinen, 2017).

⁵ Four of the participants did not reveal their ages.

⁶ The names used are pseudonyms. In order to ensure anonymity, the same participant may be given different pseudonyms at different points. The interviewer is referred to in the interview extracts as “I”, while the participants are referred to using the first initial of their pseudonyms. The extracts have been slightly edited in order to make them more easily understandable. Omitted talk is indicated by [...].

⁷ These were all heterosexual relationships, thus the abusers of the participants are all men.

⁸ See Venäläinen (2017) for a more detailed analysis of the research participants’ alignments and dis-alignments with attributes associated with femininity.

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